CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FEATURES OF THE NOUN PHRASE IN ENGLISH

R. M. W. Dixon

1. Introduction

The following is a summary of the elements which may precede the head of an NP in Modern English (this is taken from Dixon 2005: 26):

(a) an adverb which modifies a complete NP, e.g. even, simply, really; or what a or such a;

(b) a predeterminer, e.g. all (of), some (of), both (of), one (of), another (of), any (of), one-quarter (of);

(c) a determiner, which can be
   (i) an article (the, a),
   (ii) a demonstrative (e.g. this, those), or
   (iv) a possessor word or NP (my, John’s, the old man’s);

(d) a superlative (tallest, most beautiful), a comparative (taller, more beautiful); or an ordering word (next, last) and/or a cardinal number (three) or a quantifier (many, few) or qualifier (some, any);

(e) an ordinal number, e.g. fourth;

(f) one or more adjectival modifiers; an adjective here may be modified by an adverb (such as simply, really or very);

(g) one or more modifiers describing composition (e.g. wooden), origin or style (e.g. British), purpose/beneficiary (e.g. rabbit in rabbit food, medical in medical building).

Although only one element may be chosen from slots (a), (b), (c) and (e), there may be more than one in the other slots. Examples with two or three selections from slot (d) are: many taller entrants and two next fastest horses.

Note that (iii) within slot (c) is left blank here and will be shown in §3 to be filled by the same. But before turning to this, in §2 we discuss articles.
2. The Articles in English

The label ‘article’ was used for a word class in Classical Greek which had two members—what we would call ‘definite article’ (the ‘preposed article’) and what we would call ‘relative pronoun’ (the ‘postposed article’). These two grammatical words showed similar morphology, having gender, number and case inflections. The definite article had evolved from a demonstrative. There was nothing corresponding to ‘indefinite article’. No class of articles was recognised for Latin, nor for Old English.

Modern English has the, which developed from a demonstrative in Old English, and a(n), which developed from a reduction of the cardinal number one. Almost every grammarian of Modern English groups the and a(n) together, either as part of a major word class (generally adjective, but pronoun and preposition have also been suggested—see Michael 1970: 350–61) or as a separate class.

2.1. Articles as a grammatical system in Modern English

It is the custom to group together English the and a(n) as articles, and to say that they occur as determiners, in slot (c) of NP structure. For the, this is the same slot as demonstratives, from which the definite article evolved. And (c) must be the slot for the since it can precede a full array of choices from slot (d); for example, the (c) next (d) two (d) fastest (d) horses.

Many examples of complex NPs including a(n) could be explained equally well whether a(n) were in slot (c) or in slot (d). Compare a taller man and a last prayer with three (d) taller (d) men and one (d) last (d) prayer. The justification for placing a(n) in slot (c) lies in NPs such as a (c) shorter (d) last (d) prayer; sentences such as *one shorter last prayer or *three shorter last prayers are scarcely acceptable (they could only be produced in the most contrived circumstances).

Note that any of the items in slot (b) can be followed by the from slot (c) plus a head noun in plural inflection; for example all/some/both/one/any/one-quarter of the dogs. A(n) can only be used with a singular noun and so is not possible (save in highly unusual contexts) after most slot (b) items; one would not normally say, for instance, *all/some/any of a dog. However, fractions may be followed by a(n) plus a singular noun, as in one-quarter of a cake.